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Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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Submitted by: Neighbourhood Centres Queensland

Q1. What experience have you had with Commonwealth disaster funding support?

As the peak body of Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland, Neighbourhood Centres Queensland (NCQ) has been funded by the joint Commonwealth and State Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements between 2020 – 2022, including:

- FNQ and NQ Monsoon Trough Category C Flexible Funding, Round 1 and 2 (for development and implementation of the Queensland Neighbourhood Centres Strategy for Monsoon Resilience 2020 – 2023)
- CQ Bushfires Category C Flexible Funding (for the development and implementation of the Queensland Neighbourhood Centres Strategy for Bushfire Resilience 2021 – 2023).

NCQ's experience of this funding, in working with Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCCs) to develop and implement strategic approaches to supporting disaster-affected communities, has been predominately positive. NCQ extends its gratitude for the funding recognition of the NCCs sector in Queensland. The work of this sector can often be over-looked in terms of the place-based, community-led work which occurs not just in times of disasters, it occurs throughout every year, as NCCs support people in crisis and in community building.

Feedback obtained from the Neighbourhood Centre sector in regards to the commonwealth funding arrangements include:

The Application process can be time consuming and extensive within short timeframes. It appears to be designed for physical rather than social infrastructure, and both the application and reporting templates reflect this.

The Application process favours large, non-profit organisations with extensive grant writing resources rather than smaller community based organisations that are embedded in local communities. Furthermore, NCCs are often on the ground responding to disasters alongside and in their communities at the time of grant release. Their need for resourcing is impeded by their stretched capacity as they respond to disaster with their communities.

Limitations on funds expenditure for items such a rent, computers, mobile devices , IT costs and organisational infrastructure is a barrier to service delivery. Many of the organisations delivering these





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services are located in areas affected by natural disasters and do not need extra burdens placed upon their organisations without adequate compensation to continue operating.

The administrative burden of acquitting the grants can be exhausting. In many cases this has required the provision of detailed timesheets for all staff funded, itemised invoices and other extremely detailed material that puts undue administrative burdens on smaller organisations.

Neighbourhood and Community Centres are best placed for Disaster Response and recovery because they are place-based community-led organisations with extensive local knowledge. Procurement processes would ideally be congruent with this approach, rather than lean towards large non-profit organisations that are not embedded in localities, do not have local knowledge, and are not community-led or place-based.

Q2. How could Commonwealth funding support communities to reduce their disaster risk?

The Commonwealth funding could further empower communities to reduce disaster risk by prioritising place-based organisations, supporting workforce training and extending the duration of funding to allow for longer-term planning and on-ground work with communities.

With over 149 NCCs across Queensland, the NCC sector represents the largest community-led infrastructure in Queensland.

Queensland's NCCs are key social infrastructure supporting communities affected by natural disasters. Their welcoming and inclusive nature means they are especially effective in supporting vulnerable and marginalised groups and emerging issues. Their focus on Social Capital building and Community Development practice supports this approach, ensuring that communities are working in a connected and participatory manner to become more resilient to community challenges. Research supports the notion that the more connected a community is, the less risk it will experience during a disaster event.

As such, funding should not only focus on response and recovery, but Community Development initiatives that build social capital before an event. This may include community project work, but particularly needs to ensure the sector has a workforce trained in these approaches. Despite an increased concentration on place-based community-led initiatives, training and education in Community-led Development - especially in relation to disaster - is almost non-existent in tertiary education and only sporadically available through other sources. Funding needs to be available to develop training and education to support the workforce required for community-led approaches to disaster. In discussions with NCCs through the development of the Queensland Neighbourhood Centres Strategy for Disaster Resilience 2023 – 2026 (<https://ncq.org.au/resources/strategyfordisasterresilience2023-2026/>).

Neighbourhood Centres Queensland have also heard repeated concerns about the short-term timeframes of recovery funding. Centres are increasingly known to be the only, or one of a few, local organisations left to support communities after the first recovery phase, which can last over five years after the event. In addition to this, many centres are responding to compounding disasters and can be in multiple phases of preparation, response and recovery simultaneously according to different types of disasters they are experiencing whether they be drought, bushfire, monsoon or pandemic. During these cycles further concerns have been raised around the degree to which reporting requirements increase with each round of additional funding. This puts a strain on staffing capacity to undertake frontline work,





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while simultaneously undertaking increased reporting on the work, and applying for more funding to continue the work.

A review of processes and timeframes for the funding delivery would enhance NCCs' capacity to obtain vital funds to continue operations during both the short and long-term phases of disaster recovery. This would enhance the capacity of NCCs to meet the immediate recovery needs of their community. In addition to this, funding opportunities need a comprehensive coverage of information dissemination to enhance the reach to rural and remote Neighbourhood Centres and other NGOs who may not be as well informed as organisations in urban areas.

Q3. Please describe your understanding of Commonwealth disaster funding processes.

NCQ's understanding is that once a disaster event occurs in a particular Local Government Area, funding is released by the Commonwealth to the Queensland Government for recovery in that area and is a joint arrangement between state and federal Governments. Implementation of this process involves the state government administering application, assessment, operational and reporting activities for the funding. We understand that auditing processes can arise from reviews by the Commonwealth, which are operated by the state government.

In some circumstances, Neighbourhood Centres have applied for Category C funding as part of an open tender process with the Queensland Government where there are flexible criteria for the types of initiatives that can be delivered. In other circumstances funding is directed to specific locations where workers are employed to work with disaster affected community members to direct them to support.

We understand that Local Government in disaster affected areas have also received funding to employ Community Recovery Officers through the Queensland Government and a range of other organisations such as Primary Health Networks, Financial Counselling organisations and other services are also funded by the Commonwealth.

This release of funding to multiple organisations after an event can lead to challenges. Many of these organisations are unaware of each other's funding or work in the disaster space. Recently NCQ hosted a Growing Resilience Forum, aligned with the 2023 Disaster & Emergency Management Conference, where key disaster management stakeholders and organisations could connect with Neighbourhood Centres to network and map the range of players in the disaster sector. Further mapping of the recipients of Commonwealth disaster funding including those funded via the Queensland Government would be beneficial.

It is also noted that Commonwealth Disaster funding available through the Queensland Government is primarily available for response and recovery, rather than planning and preparation for a disaster event. Such funding is reactive in nature and funding could be directed towards disaster prone areas for preparation and planning activities.

Q4. Are the funding roles of the Commonwealth, states and territories, and local government, during disaster events clear?

Funding roles do need clarification in diagrams which distributed to not only formal disaster management arrangements networks, but also to networks of NGOs, such as neighbourhood centres. As previously noted, it is not only important for communities and community organisations to know how





funding is being offered through Government bodies, but to know the breadth of organisations being funded on the ground and how organisations may work collaboratively to achieve shared outcomes.

NCQ also encourages a review of government recovery funding guidelines to enable greater flexibility to provide a safety net to support people who are just outside the guidelines but are in urgent need. This requires mapping of not only where funding is to be distributed, but also service gaps where it is not being distributed. Neighbourhood Centres are often in the best position to advise about gaps due to their in-depth local knowledge of communities, vulnerable demographics within areas and affected geographics within communities.

Q5. Is there any further information you would like to provide?

As place-based community-led organisations, NCCs are embedded in communities where they deliver their services, having a physical presence, operating in a localised way and responding to local issues and opportunities. The significance of social infrastructure, such as meeting and activity spaces, the delivery of services and responses that meet the needs of local communities, as well as community ownership and governance provides on the ground experience and knowledge that other transient services do not possess. As existing social resources, the often long-standing connection with their communities establishes a foundational level of preparedness for response and recovery.

In times of disaster response and recovery, NCCs require additional funds to support disaster-affected community members to meet the increased levels of community demand for supports.

As [REDACTED] from the [REDACTED] Community Centre stated,

"Community Centres need more funding. In a disaster like this, we're 100% ready to go in an instant, but we still have people coming through the door who need our regular services. These might be people who are sleeping rough or having substance abuse issues among many other things. The work doesn't just stop."

Importantly, NCCs have identified the need within the funding regimes to generate greater equity of funding distribution between NCCs and the large NGOs. As highlighted by an instrumental neighbourhood centre in Townsville,

"Our little centre can trace the impact of disaster on our community. Our old normal disappeared with the receding flood waters of 2019. In its wake, our new normal is showing in our dataset as 17 times the volume of clients we used to service, without any extra staff or infrastructure. That is a 1,600 percent increase and that is a permanent shift, except that now the temporary workers who have allowed us to do all of that work have left because there is no funding for a second worker for the centre."

[REDACTED].

The four strategic priorities of NCCs in QLD are to:

Raise awareness and recognition of the role, value and capacity of NCCs

Strengthen relationships towards greater collaboration and relationships towards greater inclusion of community members in all stages of disasters.



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Influence policy and shape funding models to enhance funding arrangements to NCCs for place-based and community-led disaster resilience.

Foster and strengthen place-based learning and development to support disaster-affected communities.

The demonstrated ability of NCCs to support disaster resilience in their communities has been documented by NCQ (see the State Strategy.) However, just as the capacity of the Disaster Management sector, as well as the large charity organisations have been impacted by the effects of compounding disaster events, the capacity of NCCs is also being severely stretched. A significant point for the sustainability of place-based organisations lies in the disparity between the level of resourcing and support available to each of them. It is in the dissemination of long-term funding (minimum two years) to local community organisations for community development, workforce capability, training, and organisational capacity building that will make the greatest difference towards disaster resilience.

